

# **Roles and Responsibilities of the Director of Children's Services and the Lead Member for Children's Services**

## **Response of the Association of School and College Leaders**

- 1 The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) represents over 16,000 members of the leadership teams of maintained and independent schools and colleges throughout the UK. This places the association in a unique position to consider this issue from the viewpoint of the leaders of both secondary schools and colleges.
- 2 The roles and responsibilities of the Director of Children's Services (DCS) and the Lead Member for Children's Services (LMCS) are rightly described as of the greatest significance. Indeed they are typically of far greater weight than those of equivalent officers and lead members.
- 3 ASCL welcomes the guidance as described, particularly the injunction not to add further responsibilities to these already very demanding roles.
- 4 The section about how the two post-holders work together assumes that the relationship will be a positive one and well-understood by both parties. This is not always the case. Officers often feel that members go beyond proper political setting of policies and direction into interference in the management of the service. Likewise members can feel that officers are obstructive when they are constrained to carry out statutory duties. This area would repay some further thought, either in this document or as additional good-practice guidance, particularly to make more explicit how these joint responsibilities are divided and how to avoid the type of conflict mentioned above.
- 5 More fundamental, however, is the question of whether the national government should be issuing such guidance at all. The present government has an expressed intention to devolve powers and decision-making wherever possible; in this instance that suggests that it should not be specifying how local authorities organise themselves or their staff in such detail.
- 6 The joining-together of the education and children's social services functions was an act of a previous government made for good reason, and it may be that

that is a model that many authorities would prefer, but it should now be considered whether local authorities should not be free to adopt alternative models that might better suit their particular circumstances.

- 7 The need for various services to work together in the interest of individual children, and children in general, is accepted. But it is not clear that this organisational pattern is necessarily the one which will most certainly achieve that, or produce the best outcomes for children.
- 8 When there are deaths or other very serious cases that have been caused or exacerbated by services not communicating they have often involved children below school age or services other than education and children's social services. On the basis of past failures it would be more sensible to integrate children's social services with children's medical services. There is an uncomfortable sense that the two services that were put together and dubbed 'the children's workforce' were chosen not for any functional reason but because they were services run or maintained by local authorities, and thus most easily integrated rather than most in need of it.
- 9 Since local authorities are becoming less involved with education as schools switch to academies even this argument loses some of its force.
- 10 There is little evidence that this change has significantly improved the communication even between education and children's social services, which varied in quality from one area to another before the change, and do so still.
- 11 This model creates an unbalanced structure within a local authority, with a department that is very large in relation to others, larger than all the others combined. The DCS is thus closer to the chief executive than to other first-tier officers, and the LMCS likewise has far greater significance than other lead members.
- 12 This association opposed combining education and children's social services when this was first mooted not least because it was feared that the post of DCS would prove to be unmanageable. The difficulty of attempting to manage a service dealing with constant change and high stakes inspection (education) and the service which is the most exposed to violent reactions in the media if something goes wrong would seem to be so great that the post is effectively set up for failure.
- 13 There is a fundamental mismatch between a well-nigh universal service (public education) and a service targeted at a small minority in greatest need (social services). In the present policy context the former has in any case less to do with local authorities, which have had no locus in tertiary education for nearly twenty years and will in many if not all cases have no locus in secondary education soon. A DCS who pays much attention to education is risking dismissal if something goes wrong in children's services, and in future they will have every reason to disassociate with post-primary education.
- 14 Although many DCSs have managed their roles with distinction, there has been a high turnover, and some significant failures that seem to have followed from the impossibility of finding appointees who fully understand both of the services under their control, or from their inability to balance the two disparate sets of imperatives.

- 15 Arguably, some of the serious cases of recent years have arisen precisely because the DCS was distracted from ensuring a fully effective social services function by the need also to raise educational standards.
- 16 Dividing children's from adult social services has created other difficulties, especially for young people making the transition from childhood to adulthood. Children 'leaving care' at 18 is not a happy concept, when they almost invariably are still in need of care. And the departmental division tends to create a quite unnecessary dislocation at what is in any case a very difficult time for any young person.
- 17 Though it would require primary legislation, for all the reasons set out above ASCL would therefore argue that local authorities should be allowed to consider alternative models. This would not necessarily mean a return to the previous model. Some local authorities have found the present model effective and would retain it. Others might, for example, appoint directors of education and (children's) social services, but retain a combined lead member role to encourage coordination. Other might come up with more imaginative solutions that suited their circumstances and the needs of their particular communities.
- 18 I hope that this is of value to your consultation, ASCL is willing to be further consulted and to assist in any way that it can.

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